

THE WALAM OLUM

To the readers of PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY:

Rafinesque, in his *American Nations* (Phila., 1836), published his translations of the now famous Delaware (Lenape) Indian Walam Olum, believed by some students of American prehistory to be an authentic historical chronicle of the Delawares and significant as the migration narrative of a portion of the great Algonquian Indian linguistic family. The Walam Olum consisted of bundles of sticks or pieces of bark upon which mnemonic ideographs, either incised or painted in red ochre, recalled to the narrators the words of the chronicle as it was passed down from generation to generation.

Rafinesque reported that the original wooden pieces were obtained from the Delawares who were living on White River, Indiana, in the year 1820, by a Dr. Ward "as a reward for a medical cure deemed a curiosity." Rafinesque acquired the material two years later in Kentucky, and from another individual a recital of the words to accompany the painted records. His original manuscript transcribing the painted records and the words is in the Brinton Memorial Library, at the University Museum, Philadelphia. Daniel Brinton published the records in *The Lenape and Their Legends* (Phila. 1885).

Because the material is reported to have been found in Indiana, the Indiana Historical Society is reopening the whole study, attempting to get the facts about the original records, and to assess the authenticity of the legend as prehistory.

The story of Rafinesque's manuscript from the time when he transcribed the originals down to the present day, is complete and documented. But all we can say about the painted records themselves during that time is that some of them *may* have been in the Maryland Historical Society's Collections for a thirty-one year period during the lifetime of Brantz Mayer.

We have found rather strong circumstantial evidence of a Dr. Ward having been on the White River in Indiana in 1820. At the same time we have failed utterly to establish any facts surrounding the actual accession of the material by Rafinesque in Kentucky

in 1822, except to show that the Rafinesque travels for that year were within a restricted area wherein dwelt a Dr. Ward.

Rafinesque made the categorical claim that the Moravian missionary Heckewelder "saw the Olumapi or painted sticks of the Linapis." Studies, however, among the Moravian records at Bethlehem made by Dr. Lawrence Henry Gipson, Bishop S. H. Gapp, Dr. Paul A. W. Wallace and others, have so far failed to find any reference, direct or indirect, to the Walam Olum.

Is it possible that some reader of PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY has old records, letters, manuscripts, Indian "painted records," or anything else relating to the Walam Olum?

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In behalf of the Walam Olum research
group of the Indiana Historical Society

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